
HANDOUT ONE, LESSON FOUR

“THE RACE SPEECH” FILM CLIP TRANSCRIPT

CLIP ONE

CORNEL WEST: Unfortunately, as an American politician, you can't get too close to that kind of prophetic fire [Jeremiah Wright's sermons] or you get burned. So, I can understand Barack in some sense wanting to get a distance as a politician.

BARACK OBAMA: I, uh — These particular statements that have been gathered are ones that I strongly objected to, strongly condemned. Had I heard them in church, I would have expressed that concern directly to Reverend Wright. So, I didn't become familiar with these until recently.

CORNEL WEST: But on a personal level and on a very deep, truthful level, you had to try to teach people that there are voices in our society that are radical, that are not up for elections.

DAVID AXELROD: He called me that night and said, “I want to make a speech. I want to make a speech about race, and I want to put this Reverend Wright issue in context.” And we said, “Okay.” And he said, “And I want to do it no later than Tuesday.” This was Friday.

VALERIE JARRETT: He felt that he owed the American people an explanation, and that they had to hear it directly and honestly from him.

AL SHARPTON: A very painful thing for Obama was dealing with his pastor; very painful. And it was very painful to the community because people were angry because they were trying to act like he threw his pastor in front of the bus.

DAVID AXELROD: We set up this speech for the Constitution Center in Philadelphia on the theory that if you're going to go down, go down on a big stage. The anxiety in the room was palpable. And he turned to me and said, “You know, I'm going to go out there and give this speech, and people will either accept it or they won't.”

BARACK OBAMA: Thank you. Thank you.

DAVID AXELROD: “And if they don't...”

BARACK OBAMA: Thank you. Thank you.

DAVID AXELROD: “Then I just won't be president, but at least I'll have said what I think needs to be said.” He said, “That's worth something.”

BARACK OBAMA: We the people, in order to form a more perfect union. 221 years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and with these simple words launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. The document they produced was eventually signed, but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery. I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together. Unless we perfect our union.

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER: I think what was extraordinary about Obama's so-called race speech is the fact that it happened at all. There was no precedent. I mean, yes, Black people had run for president before, but at this stage in the game, there wasn't a clearly marked road that said, this is how this kind of Black person deals with people trying to disparage him and take him down in the name of race.

BARACK OBAMA: Throughout the first year of this campaign, against all predictions to the contrary, we saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity. Despite the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens, we won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country.

DAVID REMNICK: Obama was forced to give a speech on race — he was forced to. He was in trouble.

BARACK OBAMA: This is not to say that race has not been an issue in this campaign. And yet, it's only been in the last couple of weeks that the discussion of race in this campaign has taken a particularly divisive turn.

CLIP TWO

BARACK OBAMA: I have already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that have caused such controversy, and in some cases pain. But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than 20 years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith and who, over 30 years, has led a church that serves the community by doing God's work here on earth.

BARACK OBAMA: The church contains, in full, the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence, and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and, yes, the bitterness and biases that make up the Black experience in America. I can no more disown him than I can disown the Black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my White grandmother; a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world,

but a woman who once confessed her fear of Black men who passed her by on the street. And who, on more than one occasion, has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

JELANI COBB: As opposed to just cutting Jeremiah Wright off immediately or even kind of saying “It’s not possible for me to win,” he does exactly what a professor or a teacher would do in that circumstance, which is step into the middle of it and look at it panoramically and then try to understand it for what it is. Under other circumstances, we would call that a class. In Barack Obama’s circumstance, this is a public address or speech.

BARACK OBAMA: The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really worked through. A part of our union that we have not yet made perfect. We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country, but we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African American community and the larger American community today can be traced directly to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

BARACK OBAMA: The anger is real. It is powerful. And to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races. In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the White community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they’ve been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience. As far as they’re concerned, no one handed them anything. They built it from scratch. So, when they are told to bus their children to a school across town, when they hear an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed, when they’re told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

CORNEL WEST: Now I believe in staying in contact with the humanity of my precious White brothers and sisters, but they need to understand that in a White supremacist civilization, you’ve been the beneficiary of unbelievable privilege and entitlement; that you have a right to justice, you have a right to fairness, but your resentment will never have the same weight, morally and spiritually, as a Black rage who had to come to terms with foremothers and forefathers raped and violated and exploited and lynched. And when he presented that equivalent, it made me upset. I said, “You’re not telling the truth!”

BARACK OBAMA: To wish away the resentments of White Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns, this, too, widens the racial divide and blocks the path to understanding.

CLIP THREE

BARACK OBAMA: The profound mistake of Reverend Wright’s sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society, it’s that he spoke as if our society was static, as if no progress had been made, as if this country — a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of White and Black, Latino, Asian, rich, poor, young and old — is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past.

JEREMIAH WRIGHT: The Senator came to my home to ask me to stop preaching until after the election. I’ve been preaching this way for 50 years, regardless of who’s running for what office: Carol Moseley Braun, Harold Washington, Barack Obama. That doesn’t change or affect or alter the gospel in any way. He then paid me one of the highest compliments I’ve ever had paid to me. He said to me, “You know what your problem is?” I said, “What’s my problem?” “As a preacher, you have to speak the truth.” I said, “That’s a good problem to have.”

TERRY MORAN: Do you consider yourself a Black man or an American first?

BARACK OBAMA: An American, absolutely.

TERRY MORAN: Is there a difference between Black patriotism and White patriotism?

BARACK OBAMA: No, I don’t think so. I mean, what I think is that the African American community is much more familiar with some of the darker aspects of American life and American history. I think that they understand America much less as a marching band playing, you know, John Philip Sousa, and they understand America much more as a jazz composition with blue notes. And I think those are different things. And so, the African American community can express great rage and anger about this country and love it all the same.